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‘Religion’ as a Philosophical Problem: Historical and Conceptual Dilemmas in Contemporary Pluralistic Philosophy of Religion

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Abstract In the late nineteenth century, European philosophical theologians concerned about the perceived threat of secularity played a crucial role in the construction of the category of ‘religion,’ conceived as a transcultural universal, the genus of which the so-called ‘world religions’ are species. By reading the work of the late John Hick (1922–2012), the most influential contemporary philosophical advocate of religious pluralism, through an historically informed hermeneutic of suspicion, this paper argues that orientalist-derived understandings of religion continue to play a significant (though often unacknowledged) role within the philosophy of religion today. Though couched in the language of pluralism, Hick’s later work in the philosophy of religion functions apologetically to maintain a version of the religious–secular distinction that, while theologically and politically loaded, is, I show, philosophically arbitrary. Moving the philosophy of religion beyond Eurocentrism, I argue, will require freeing it from the logic of the modern understanding of religion.

Keywords John Hick · World religions · Cultural history of the study of religion · Secular · Secularization · Orientalism · Philosophy of religion

In the late nineteenth century, European philosophical theologians concerned about the perceived threat of secularity played a crucial role in the construction of the category of ‘religion,’ conceived as a transcultural universal, the genus of which the so-called ‘world religions’ are species. By reading the work of the late John Hick (1922–2012), the most influential contemporary philosophical advocate of religious pluralism, through an historically informed hermeneutic of suspicion, this paper argues that orientalist-derived understandings of *religion* continue to play a significant (though often unacknowledged) role within the philosophy of religion today. Though couched in the language of pluralism, Hick’s later work in the philosophy of religion functions apologetically to maintain a version of the religious–secular distinction that, while theologically and politically loaded, is, I show,

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philosophically arbitrary. Moving the philosophy of religion beyond Eurocentrism, I argue, will require freeing it from the logic of the modern understanding of religion.

From the perspective of mainstream analytic philosophy of religion, my approach in this paper may seem somewhat unorthodox; employing a broadly genealogical method, I begin with a fairly lengthy discussion of the intellectual history of some key concepts in contemporary pluralistic philosophy of religion, including categories like the 'world religions.' Drawing especially from the work of Charles Taylor and Tomoko Masuzawa, I argue that these categories are best understood as part of an emerging self-understanding of 'the West' as 'secular.' It is within this historical trajectory that I then attempt to situation Hick's 'pluralistic hypothesis' that 'the great post-axial faiths constitute different ways of experiencing, conceiving and living in relation to an ultimate divine Reality which transcends all our varied visions of it.'[1] Rather than engaging Hick's work directly on its own terms, I read it across the grain, attempting to show how it functions, in seeming tension with its stated purpose, to maintain certain Western/Christian assumptions. I conclude with a sort of open-ended and admittedly rather schematic manifesto for a more genuinely pluralistic approach to the discipline.

World Religions

To begin, consider the following picture: in the world today, there is a finite number of world religions. There is some disagreement about which religions qualify as *world* religions—that is to say, 'great' or 'major traditions'—but as many as 11 are typically judged to make the cut.[2] Although classified under one of two headings—variously construed as Western vs. Eastern traditions, prophetic vs. wisdom traditions, etc.—each of these major traditions is a token of the same type, namely, religion. Religion is a human universal, but it takes many forms, as a result of the differences among cultures. The result is a geographical (and quasi-racial) distribution of religion's varying forms, including those characteristic of China, India, the Middle East, and Europe. However, although these differences should be respected, perhaps even 'celebrated,' they are ultimately less significant than the similarities.

Though something of a composite sketch, the foregoing description is, I think, a fair characterization of the picture of religion with which most college-educated Americans operate.[3] It should certainly be familiar to anyone who has taken (or taught) a course, or read a textbook, on world religions, but it is not the mental map with which earlier generations of Westerners operated. During the Middle Ages, the Latin term *religio* functioned rather differently, not as the name of a genus of which Christianity was a species, but as a synonym for 'piety' or to designate clergy in orders.[4] Indeed, as David Chidester points out, prior to the Reformation, 'the word in English did not have a plural.'[5] The term 'world

[1] John Hick, *An interpretation of religion: human responses to the transcendent* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 235–6.

[2] These include Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism, Zoroastrianism, Taoism, Confucianism, Shinto, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

[3] Throughout this essay, I focus on the USA, because it is the context I know best; however, I suspect that analogous points could be made about other Western understandings.

[4] See William Cavanaugh, *The myth of religious violence: secular ideology and the roots of modern conflict* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 65.

[5] David Chidester, *Christianity: a global history* (New York: HarperCollins, 2000), 344.

religion' was similarly first used in the singular, in reference to Christianity; non-Christian traditions were at best 'national religions,' i.e., nonuniversal religions peculiar to specific geographical regions or people groups.[6] Up through the mid-nineteenth century, as Tomoko Masuzawa notes, Europeans 'had a well-established convention for categorizing the peoples of the world into four parts, rather unequal in size and uneven in specificity, namely, Christians, Jews, Mohammedans (as Muslims were commonly called then), and the rest. The last part, the rest, comprised those variously known as heathens, pagans, idolaters, or sometimes polytheists.'[7] The displacement of this earlier taxonomy by the world religions schema might be assumed to represent 'a turn away from the Eurocentric and Eurohegemonic conception of the world, toward a more egalitarian and lateral delineation,' but the historical developments that explain this discursive shift require a more nuanced and critical assessment.[8] Of particular significance is the emergence of a new self-understanding of the West as secular.

Secularization

Ours is widely regarded as a secular age, but what exactly does that mean? While it is something of a truism that the present differs in important ways from the past, there is today little agreement among scholars of secularization as to precisely what has changed, or why. The result is that different thinkers use the term 'secularization' in quite different ways. One influential version of secularization theory defines secularization as the emancipation of once-religious domains of life from ecclesial oversight and the resulting structural differentiation of society into distinct 'spheres'—the state, the economy, medicine, education—each governed by its own criteria. A good example of this kind of structural differentiation is provided by the separation of church and state in liberal democracies. It is in this sense of the term 'secular' that we can speak of the USA, France, and India as all being 'secular states,' despite varying levels and forms of belief and practice.

According to a second and importantly different account, secularization refers to a decline in belief and practice, e.g., to people no longer believing in God or attending church. As many scholars have pointed out, there is no necessary connection between secularization in the first sense and secularization in the second. Consider the USA, 'One of the earliest societies to separate Church and State, it is also the Western society with the highest statistics for religious belief and practice.'[9] Secularization as religious decline was widely discussed during the 1960s, but in recent years the theory has been subjected to significant criticism, and many of the sociologists and theologians who formerly championed the death of God have retracted their obituaries. Peter Berger, who once predicted that by 'the 21st century, religious believers are likely to be found only in small sects, huddled together to resist a worldwide secular culture,'[10] now

[6] Tomoko Masuzawa, *The invention of world religions: or, how European Universalism was preserved in the language of pluralism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 23.
[7] Masuzawa, xi.
[8] Masuzawa, 13.
[9] Charles Taylor, *A secular age*, (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap, 2007), 2.
[10] Peter Berger, 'A bleak outlook is seen for religion,' *New York Times* (25 April 1968), 3. Quoted in Rodney Stark and Roger Finke, *Acts of faith: explaining the human side of religion* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 58.

concedes that 'the world today, with some exceptions…, is as furiously religious as it ever was, and in some places more so than ever.'[11] However, the thesis of religious decline continues to enjoy the support of a number of influential sociologists, and when suitably qualified—as a theory about the state of Christian churches in parts of Western Europe, for instance—it is worthy of serious consideration.

In his recent book *A secular age*, Charles Taylor identifies a third sense of secularization, which has to do with the *conditions for*, rather than the extent of, belief.[12] 'The shift to secularity in this sense consists, among other things, of a move from a society where belief in God is unchallenged and indeed, unproblematic, to one in which it is understood to be one option among others, and frequently not the easiest to embrace.'[13] As Steve Bruce has put it, 'the position of the modern believer is quite unlike that of the Christian of the Middle Ages in that, while we may still believe, we cannot avoid the knowledge that many people (including many people like us) believe differently.'[14] To suggest, in this third sense, that ours is a secular age is to say *not* that belief is declining per se, but that no single perspective—whether 'religious' or otherwise—enjoys the status of a 'default option.' Believers of varying stripes jostle with one another and with 'unbelievers'[15]—not just in society at large, but within families and among friends—and individuals sometimes find themselves conflicted and uncertain.[16] It is secularization in this third register that Taylor takes as his focus.

In order to appreciate what is distinctive about Taylor's account, it will help to contrast it with two other ways of telling the story. According to the first of these, which Taylor calls 'subtraction theories,' secularity is what is left over after human beings have managed to liberate themselves from the illusions or epistemic limitations of their religious past. One common variant of this view attributes secularization to the rise of modern science and the disenchantment of the universe. The history of secularization is on this account a story of progress, which can be told only from the perspective of those who have already achieved its final enlightened telos.[17] As Freud put it in *The future of an*

[11] Peter L. Berger, 'The desecularization of the world: a global overview,' in *The Descularization of the world: resurgent religion and world politics*, ed. Berger (Washington, D.C.:Ethics and Public Policy Center, 1999), 2.

[12] The remainder of this section is borrowed from my critical notice of *A secular age* in *Philosophical Investigations* 33:1 (January 2010): 67–74. Permission to reprint is kindly granted by John Wiley and Sons.

[13] Taylor, 3.

[14] Steve Bruce, *God is dead: secularization in the west* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 18. Bruce is developing a point made by Peter Berger in *The heretical imperative: contemporary possibilities of religious affirmation* (London: Collins).

[15] The scare quotes here are meant to signal that the term 'unbelievers' is tendentious—everyone believes *something*.

[16] Taylor writes, 'This mutual fragilization of all the different views in presence, the undermining sense that others think differently, is certainly one of the main features of the world of 2000, in contrast to that of 1500.' Taylor, 303–304.

[17] These supposed developments can of course be given a theological gloss. For example, Hegel claimed that '[t]he development and advance of Spirit from the time of the Reformation onwards consist in this, that Spirit, having now gained the consciousness of its Freedom, through that process of mediation which takes place between man and God—that is, in the full recognition of the objective process as the existence of the Divine essence—now takes it up and follows it out in building up the edifice of secular relations.' Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *The philosophy of history*, trans. J. Sibree (New York: Dover, 1956), p. 422. More recently, and from a very different philosophical paradigm, Gianni Vattimo has argued that, '[i]f it is the mode in which the weakening of Being realizes itself as the *kenosis* of God, which is the kernel of the history of salvation, secularization shall no longer be conceived of as abandonment of religion but as the paradoxical realization of Being's religious vocation.' Gianni Vattimo, *After Christianity*, trans. Luca D'Isanto (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), p. 24.

illusion, 'a turning-away from religion is bound to occur with the fatal inevitability of a process of growth.'[18] Against this kind of story, Taylor argues that 'Western modernity, including its secularity, is the fruit of new inventions, newly constructed self-understandings and related practices, and can't be explained in terms of perennial features of human life.'[19] On Taylor's view, secularization involves the displacement of one social imaginary by another or, rather, a series of such displacements. However natural and unremarkable it may seem to us, secularity had to be *constructed*.

This latter view—that secularity was constructed not discovered—is shared by a second kind of account with which Taylor's view can, in certain *other* respects, also be contrasted. This is the view developed by John Milbank and associated with Radical Orthodoxy. On this account, secularization is the outgrowth of an intellectual error, a theological mistake. The culprit, on Milbank's version of the story, is Duns Scotus, whose 'univocal' conception of being collapsed the difference in kind between God and creatures into a difference in degree. From there, it was a slippery slope to deism, Hume's *Dialogues*, and Richard Dawkins. Taylor calls this view the 'intellectual deviation' story. In contrast to subtraction theorists, who associate secularization with progress, deviation theorists regard it as decline. Taylor acknowledges that some such theological developments may be part of the story, but he argues that they cannot be the whole, or even the most important part, of it. Milbank's account is far too intellectualist to explain how secularity 'emerges as a mass phenomenon.'[20] As a different critic of Radical Orthodoxy, Jeffrey Stout, puts the point, 'Intellectual errors do sometimes have significant social and political consequences, but history rarely works in the theory-driven way that philosophers and theologians imagine.'[21]

It is also clear that Taylor's *tone* differs importantly from that of Milbank and other theological critics of secularity. Readers of *A secular age* will detect none of the nostalgia for the past or denunciation of the present that characterize much Radical Orthodoxy. While there are many features of our times of which Taylor is critical, he seems on the whole to think that the trade-offs have worked to our advantage. 'Even if we had a choice,' he writes, 'I'm not sure we wouldn't be wiser to stick with the present dispensation.'[22] Contemporary forms of 'spirituality' and religious life, though prone to distinctive and familiar kinds of corruption, are not necessarily as frivolous and self-indulgent as their detractors like to make out, and in any case, there is no possibility of turning back the clock.

Indeed, if the story Taylor tells is correct, there is something ironic about efforts by theologians to reform our wayward age; for on Taylor's account, it was precisely the drive by elites to make better Christians of the masses that helped to produce a secular age in the first place: religious Reform, not science or an intellectual error, is the engine that drives secularization. As David Martin puts it, 'Christians have raised the bar about what it means to be a Christian, and so inhibited the take-up.'[23] The Protestant

[18] Sigmund Freud, *The future of an illusion*, trans. and ed. James Strachey (New York: W.W. Norton, 1961 [1927]), 55.
[19] Taylor, 22. Many secularization theorists would agree. For instance, Steve Bruce insists that 'what people are "essentially" like, stripped of their culture and history, is unknowable, because we are all products of culture and history.' Bruce, 42.
[20] Taylor, 775.
[21] Jeffrey Stout, *Democracy and tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 101.
[22] Taylor, 513.
[23] David Martin, *On secularization: Towards a revised general theory* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), 119.

Reformation is one example of what Taylor calls 'Reform' (with a capital *R*), but it was hardly an isolated phenomenon. Beginning in the Middle Ages and continuing down through the temperance movements of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Christian reformers undertook the challenge of disciplining and reordering society, purging it (as best they could) not simply of perceived vices like the dancing, drinking, and sex that attended community festivals like Carnival, but also of the 'superstitions' and 'excesses' of popular religion. This process naturally generated resentment toward Christianity's institutional forms and its clergy, which in turn helped to facilitate the emergence in the eighteenth century of what Taylor calls 'exclusive humanism,' but it also gave rise to new forms of Christianity characterized by discipline and disenchantment. As Taylor puts it, 'the interesting story is not simply one of decline, but also of a new placement of the sacred or spiritual in relation to individual and social life. This new placement is now the occasion for recompositions of spiritual life in new forms, and for new ways of existing both in and out of relation to God.'[24] Rooted as they were in historical contingencies, these developments were far from linear and resulted in very different outcomes in different countries, generations, economic and social classes, professions, political systems, etc.

During what Taylor calls the 'expressivist revolutions' of the 1960s, with their emphasis on authenticity and self-realization, the pendulum swung back the other direction, away from the buffered identities and moral discipline characteristic of Reform, breaking the link between Christianity and civilizational order in the West. This has had the effect of weakening certain forms of religiosity (those Taylor calls *neo-Durkheimian*) and strengthening others (the post-Durkheimian, in which religion is disconnected from national or political identity). The familiar result—dramatized by Robert Wuthnow's distinction between 'seeking' and 'dwelling'[25]—is two distinct sensibilities: 'those which underlie respectively the new kinds of spiritual quest, on one side, and the prior option for an authority which forecloses them on the other.'[26]

No doubt most people find themselves somewhere between these ideal types, but it also is possible to live one's life outside what we have come to call religion. A recent survey by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life found that 'one-fifth of the U.S. public—and a third of adults under 30—are religiously unaffiliated.'[27] Moreover, immigration (particularly what Martin calls the 'migratory backflow of empire'[28]), while serving to revitalize and 'de-Europeanize' American Christianity, is also contributing to the diversification of America's religious landscape.[29] 'For example, Muslims, roughly two-thirds of whom are immigrants, now account for roughly 0.6 % of the U.S. adult population; and Hindus, more than eight-in-ten of whom are foreign born, now account for approximately 0.4 % of the population.'[30] These percentages may seem small, but the expansion of America's traditionally Protestant denominational structure to include first

[24] Taylor, 437.
[25] See Robert Wuthnow, *After heaven: spirituality in America since the 1950s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 3ff.
[26] Taylor, 512.
[27] The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, '"Nones" on the Rise' (9 October 2012), 9.
[28] Martin, 71.
[29] See José Casanova, *Public religions in the modern world* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 154ff.
[30] The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, 'U.S. religious landscape survey: religious beliefs and practices: diverse and politically relevant' (June 2008), p. 8.

Catholics, then Jews, and now Muslims and Hindus is altering how Americans think about themselves, and what they believe about each others' beliefs. According to another Pew study, 70 % of Americans now believe that 'many religions can lead to eternal life.'[31]

The net effect of the past five centuries is not, for Taylor, the withering away of belief in the West, but a shift in its conditions—of what it is *to believe*. The characteristic feature of our secular age is what Taylor calls its 'immanent frame': life is lived within a self-sufficient, 'natural' order, which can be explained and 'envisaged without reference to God.'[32] God is manifest neither in discrete instances of the sacred (as distinct from the profane) nor in the moral order on which civilization is said to depend. To say that the world can be understood apart from God is not, however, to say that it must be understood as *closed* to transcendence—for the immanent frame can be conceived as open to something beyond itself. Indeed, the modern distinction between the natural and the supernatural—like the modern conception of a miracle as a violation of a law of nature—belongs to the immanent frame, to a world imagined in terms of an order from which God's presence has been withdrawn.[33]

Internal Relations

Secularization is typically understood as a theory about what has happened to religion in the West under conditions of modernity. Although scholars disagree in terms of the answers they give—differentiation, privatization, decline, etc.—the fact that they are capable of debating them suggests that they are agreed as to the nature of the question. Of course, much of the disagreement over the state of religion in modernity revolves around how religion ought to be understood, but the almost universal assumption in the literature is that the term can, and indeed must, be defined independently of 'secularization.' The thesis that secularization involves religious decline, for example, presupposes some independent conception of religion in terms of which this putative decline is to be measured. What is often overlooked, however, is that historically, the origins of the term 'secular' predate the development of our contemporary understanding of religion. Indeed, my suggestion here is that the construction of secularity—and perhaps more importantly, the development of various teleological *discourses* of secularization through which these processes were interpreted[34]—is what gave rise to the category of religion that most scholars today take for granted. The hypothesis I'd like for us to entertain is that the key elements of secularization—religion, secularity, modernity, and the West—are connected

[31] The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, 'U.S. religious landscape survey,' p. 4.

[32] Taylor, 543.

[33] Whereas the late medieval distinction between the natural and the 'supernatural' was intended by the nominalists and the Protestant Reformers to secure the autonomy of the supernatural against the natural, the modern distinction performs the reverse function. Taylor, 542.

[34] These latter discourses may in fact have served to hasten the onset of secularization in Europe. Casanova has argued that '[w]e need to entertain seriously the proposition that secularization became a self-fulfilling prophecy in Europe once large sectors of the population of Western European societies, including the Christian churches, accepted the basic premises of the theory of secularization; that secularization is a teleological process of modern social change; that the more modern a society, the more secular it becomes; and that secularity is "a sign of the times."' José Casanova, 'Immigration and the new religious pluralism,' in *Secularism, religion and multicultural citizenship*, ed. Geoffrey Brahm Levey and Tariq Modood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 144.

not merely *externally*, as conventional social-scientific accounts of secularization assume, but *internally* (or conceptually).

During the Middle Ages, the secular was contrasted not with religion as we understand it today, but with the *sacred*, a distinction which originally had to do with the experience of *time*. In medieval Latin, the word *saeculum* meant 'age' or 'century.' Whereas 'we moderns'[35] apprehend ourselves to be moving chronologically through what Walter Benjamin called 'homogeneous, empty time,' medieval Christians, as Benedict Anderson has noted, 'had no conception of history as an endless chain of cause and effect or of radical separations between past and present.'[36] The distinction between the secular and the sacred marked the difference between ordinary times and kairotic times—those moments of history linked vertically (simultaneously) to eternity, rather than horizontally (sequentially), through the causal relation of one event to the next.[37] For the medievals, as José Casanova points out, there were in reality three times, not two—'the eternal age of God and the temporal-historical age, which is itself divided into the sacred-spiritual time of salvation, represented by the church's calendar, and the secular age proper (*saeculum*).'[38] What was lost in the transition to modernity was not the distinction between history and eternity—between the respective times of this world and the next—but the division *within* history between *kairoi* and *chronoi*: for 'us moderns,' *all* history is experienced as secular time. This collapsing of categories—motivated in part by the efforts of 'Reformers' to hold all Christians to the same high standards, thus breaking down the medieval hierarchy of vocations[39]—made it possible to use the term 'secular' in a new way, as contrasted not with the sacred, but with the entire system within which the earlier distinction had its life. The upshot is that religion as we tend to think of it today—a concept that generalizes outward from the experience of European Christians—was discovered by Europeans just as it seemed to be receding in the West.[40]

The emerging discourse of religion was, among other things, a 'discourse of othering,' which permitted an invidious contrast between the rational, progressive West and the religious (and comparatively backward) rest, i.e., those regions of the world over against which the imagined community of Europe was in the process of constructing a collective identity. For this reason, subtraction theories of secularization played a critical role in the development of two new sciences of cultural difference: orientalism and anthropology.[41] Whereas the former concerned itself with the 'great civilizations of the East,' especially their

[35] This account of the modern experience of time is an oversimplification, which occludes what Homi Bhabha calls 'disjunctive temporality' – the uneasy coming together of varying 'times.' See Homi K. Bhabha, 'DissemiNation: time, narrative, and the margins of the modern nation' in Homi K. Bhabha, ed. *Nation and narration* (New York: Routledge, 1990): 291-322. I put the phrase 'we moderns' in scare quotes as a reminder that the distinction between 'us' and 'them' is not as clear-cut as might be imagined. To put it in Taylor's idiom, the immanent frame does not include everyone.

[36] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined communities: reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism*, Rev. Ed. (London: Verso, 1991), 23. See Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations* (London: Fontana, 1973), 263.

[37] See the quote by Erich Auerbach in Anderson, 23-4.

[38] Casanova, *Public Religions*, 14.

[39] See Taylor, 265-6.

[40] Masuzawa, 19.

[41] See Masuzawa, 15. The application of traditional secularization theory to regions outside Christendom is inherently problematic. As David Martin notes, 'in so far as one uses classical secularization theory to characterize Islam as undeveloped with respect to internalization, privatization, pluralism and democracy, one is using precisely the criteria which derive from Western developments and the Gestalt initiated by the Reformation and the Enlightenment. One is also ignoring the huge variety of possibilities within contemporary Islam.' Martin, 64.

histories and ancient literature, the latter focused on the practices of 'primitive cultures,' e.g., the 'tribal societies' of Africa, the Americas, and Oceania, which were understood to have no writing, and so no history. Both categories of people were presumed to be more religious than Westerners, but the forms of religious life differed; great civilizations had world religions, whereas tribal societies knew only 'primitive religion.'[42]

Pluralism as a Response to Secularization

The orientalist fascination with non-Western cultures that emerged as the reverse side of Europe's new secular self-understanding had unintended consequences. In the first place, it seemed to relativize Christianity, cutting it down to size as one possibility among others—*a* world religion rather than *the* world religion. As Ernst Troeltsch put the point in his 1897 essay 'Christianity and the history of religion,' 'Christianity lost its exclusive-supernatural foundation. It was now perceived as only one of the great world religions, along with Islam and Buddhism, and like these, as constituting the culmination of complicated historical developments.'[43] In addition, the development of post-Christian ideologies and the prospect of religious decline threatened the Durkheimian link between Christianity and the community from within. In this way, the very processes of secularization that allowed subtraction theorists to portray the West as an advanced civilization seemed to present a serious challenge to the hegemony of Western Christianity.

In response to these anxieties, Troeltsch and other Protestant theologians in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries developed new ways of thinking and talking about religious differences. Their solution, as Masuzawa shows in her book *The invention of world religions*, was the pluralistic affirmation of *religion as such* over against secularism, which allowed them to enlist the world religions on the side of Christianity, rather than viewing them as ideological competitors.[44] If religion is a human universal, then Christianity can be vindicated as a particular (though not unique) instance of the more general phenomenon. What began as a discourse of othering was in this way folded into a discourse of assimilation,[45] hence the subtitle of Masuzawa's book: *How European universalism was preserved in the language of pluralism*. As she puts it, 'the new discourse of pluralism and diversity of religions…neither displaced nor disabled the logic of European hegemony—formerly couched in the language of the universality of Christianity—but, in a way, gave it a new lease.'[46]

The success of this new apologetic strategy depended on being able to relativize the differences among the religions and to emphasize their continuities. This meant positing an essence to religion behind the variety—a common thread linking Christianity with the other

[42] The term her is used in singular form to signal the fact that the 'religions' of primitive cultures were not thought to vary greatly.
[43] Ernst Troeltsch, 'Christianity and the history of religion.' Quoted by Masuzawa, 312.
[44] See Masuzawa, 312ff.
[45] Or more precisely: the discourse bifurcated. Today, the secular-religious distinction continues to function as part of a politics of exclusion – e.g., toward Muslims in Western countries. Casanova writes, 'It is the secular identity shared by European elites and ordinary people alike that paradoxically turns religion and the barely submerged Christian European identity into a thorny and perplexing issue, when it comes to delimiting the external geographic boundaries and to defining the internal cultural identity of a European Union in the process of being constituted.' Casanova, 'Immigration and the New Religious Pluralism,' 144.
[46] Masuzawa, xiv.

'great traditions' and enabling us to distinguish religion from irreligion, genuine religion from superstition, and the world religions from lesser traditions (variously described as 'primitive,' 'primal,' 'tribal,' or 'preaxial'). In practice, of course, identifying an essence was a matter of creation rather than discovery, which involved forming other world religions in the image and likeness of Christianity. The supposedly universal features singled out for comparison—foundational texts (rather than living practitioners), conceptions of the divine (rather than ritual), etc.—reflected the preoccupations of Protestant theology; anything not exhibiting these markers was, by definition, not a genuine world religion.

The template was not, however, Christianity in all its messy and disputed materiality, but an idealized, secularized Christianity—disenchanted, socially differentiated and privatized, disciplined by Reform, and sensitized to the criticisms of its cultured despisers. Pluralism was the work of theological elites, and though Protestantism supplied the prototype, pluralism improved upon it. This entailed rejecting as inessential precisely those dimensions of other traditions that were deemed susceptible to secularist critique—that is to say, those features of other religions that Western theologians found most embarrassing about their own. As Mark Heim has observed, 'It is hardly an accident that pluralistic theology, in its definition and treatment of the religions, takes care to inoculate them against just those objections theologians in the West have found so troubling.'[47] That the world religions were constructed so as to correct for perceived vulnerabilities in historical Christianity allows them to maintain a delicate balance between exoticized otherness and familiar sameness—not unlike so-called 'ethnic' cuisine adapted to Western tastes. Moreover, since the world religions are seen as ultimately compatible with one another—as different but not incommensurable—their various flavors can be sampled without abandoning the comforts of one's home tradition.

Nevertheless, it would be inadequate simply to dismiss the world religions as figments of the Western imagination. Under the weight of European imperialism, life was breathed, through a process of appropriation by non-Westerners, into the projections of Western elites. During the nineteenth century, for example, Indian intellectuals fashioned a new identity for themselves, drawing freely on orientalist motifs. 'According to their projective view, "Hinduism," though the term itself may be a neologism, refers to the ancient faith of India, a religion that was originally and essentially monotheistic, and whose ancient wisdom is encapsulated in certain select but voluminous canonical texts…'[48] As Timothy Fitzgerald observes, '[t]he onus was largely on the local representative of the indige[n]ous culture to prove…that these forms of life were genuine religions, that is soteriologies based on an awareness of God or some equivalent transcendental object and advocating moral precepts acceptable to westerners…'[49] Yet, to reject the resulting constructions as inauthentic distortions—as some Western scholars appear to do—would be a mistake.[50] Against a backdrop of colonial power and European prejudice, developments that might at first appear to be mere capitulations to colonialism can also be interpreted as forms of resistance by the colonized. As Brian Pennington notes, the too simplistic thesis 'that Britain invented Hinduism grants altogether too much power to colonialism: it both mystifies and magnifies colonial means of domination and erases

[47] S. Mark Heim, *Salvations: truth and difference in religion* (Mryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1995), 108.
[48] Masuzawa, 283.
[49] Timothy Fitzgerald, The ideology of religious studies (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 31.
[50] It would also, ironically, reinscribe the claim by Western scholars to understand non-Western traditions better than do their practitioners.

Hindu agency and creativity.'[51] By living into the constructions of Westerners, but also subverting and exploiting them in subtle ways, Indian elites like Swami Vivekananda, who introduced Vedanta to Americans at the first World's Parliament of Religions, were able to claim for Hinduism—once categorized under the rubric of 'paganism'—the privileges reserved by the West for world religions.[52]

That the pluralist paradigm had acquired a life of its own was evident when the Parliament convened in Chicago in 1893. On September 11 of that year, according to Richard Hughes Seager, 'the Columbian Liberty Bell in the Court of Honor of the World's Columbian Exposition tolled ten times to honor what were a century ago considered the world's ten great religions: Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Zoroastrianism, Taoism, Confucianism, Shintoism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.'[53] More than 60 religious leaders, representing the 'great traditions,' assembled to greet what Seager calls 'the dawn of religious pluralism.' The purpose of the parliament, as Charles Carroll Bonney reminded the delegates in his opening address, was 'to unite all Religion against all irreligion; to make the golden rule the basis of this union; and to present to the world the substantial unity of many religions in the good deeds of the religious life.'[54] Here, we can witness in their infancy rhetorical moves that anticipate those of many contemporary interfaith movements: the invocation of Religion—here capitalized—against secularism; the bringing together of elites to 'represent' religion's major taxa; the quest for a global 'religious ethic'; and the harnessing of religion's moral energies to the cause of global progress.

It is notable that the World's Parliament of Religions was held in conjunction with the World's Columbian Exposition—the nation's celebration of the 400th anniversary of Columbus's arrival in the Americas. The development of the pluralistic paradigm can be understood as both an outgrowth of and as colluding in Western expansionism. As we saw earlier, a secular age is characterized, on Taylor's account, not by the absence of belief but by a diversity of 'options.' However, one weakness of Taylor's analysis, in my view, is that it pays inadequate attention to the ways in which colonialism and neocolonialism (in the guise of neoliberal globalization) have contributed to this proliferation of possibilities.[55] These colonial encounters had the effect not simply of bringing new religious possibilities to European awareness but also of commodifying these possibilities as consumer items for Western markets. So conceived—as '"brands" of a common

[51] Brian Pennington, *Was Hinduism invented? Britons, Indians, and the colonial construction of religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 5. Today, many millions of people self-identify as 'Hindu'; to write contemporary Hinduism off as inauthentic only adds insult to injury by ironically perpetuating the orientalist claim to know the tradition better than its practitioners. Of course, one need not uncritically accept the claims of Hindutva, e.g., that Hinduism is the world's oldest religion.

[52] Referring to Vivekananda's enthusiastic reception at the Parliament, Diana Eck writes, 'Perhaps America's own burgeoning universalist spirit was eager to hear that spirit echoed by a young Hindu reformer from the other side of the world.' Diana L. Eck, *A new religious America: how a 'Christian Country' has become the world's most religiously diverse nation* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 97. My own view is slightly more skeptical.

[53] Richard Hughes Seager, Introduction to Part I, *The dawn of religious pluralism: voices from the world's parliament of religions, 1893*, ed. Seager (La Salle, Ill.: Open Court, 1993), 15. Note that Sikhism had not yet made the list.

[54] Charles Carroll Bonney, 'Words of welcome,' in *The dawn of religious pluralism*, p. 21.

[55] As Charles Long has observed, the changes wrought within the cultures of colonizers as a result of contact with colonized peoples are frequently downplayed, because the 'signifiers'—his term for those in positions of rhetorical privilege—tend to 'explain all changes as modes of development and evolution of ideational and historical clusters of meaning' already latent within the signifiers' own cultures 'that have come to fruition in the modern period.' Charles H. Long, *Significations: signs, symbols, and images in the interpretation of religion* (Aurora, Co.: The Davies Group, 1986), 6.

product'—the world religions pose little threat to regnant political and economic orders.[56] As Masuzawa notes, 'One of the most consequential effects of this discourse is that it spiritualizes what are material practices and turns them into expressions of something timeless and suprahistorical, which is to say, it depoliticizes them.'[57]

This process of privatization, commodification, and assimilation has fundamentally altered the relationship of Christianity to other traditions. The distinctive feature of the so-called world religions is that they are *options within*, rather than *alternatives to*, Western culture. By contrast, pluralist Christianity is not always a possibility within other cultural horizons: witness the typically unrequited appropriation by Westerners of Kabbalah, Sufism, yoga, Zen meditation, Feng Shui, the Dalai Lama, etc. The effect of this asymmetry is a kind of missionary project in reverse; instead of attempting to impose itself on alien cultures, pluralistic Christian theology draws these cultures—or suitably repackaged versions of them—into its own orbit. While permitting the validation of other perspectives, it nevertheless retains its ideological hegemony by supplying the framework within which these perspectives are organized and evaluated. If the world religions are consumer products, pluralism controls the means of production. Today, Western fantasies of non-Western religious authenticity intersect with non-Western adaptive strategies in curious ways; while Western practitioners of Zen Buddhism meditate on tatami mats, many Japanese–Americans sit on pews and sing hymns in Buddhist 'churches.'

Understandably, this emerging conception of religion bore within its optimistic shell the seeds of future resentment. The same pressures that forged the world religions also helped to galvanize those distinctly modern social movements which—again extrapolating from Christianity—we call 'fundamentalisms.' If mimesis and adaptation represent one path to empowerment for non-Western religious movements, nativism and resistance represent another; only the moral valences are switched. It is precisely those ostensibly religious dimensions of culture that defy Western appropriation—so-called traditional women's roles, for instance—that nativists seize upon as most 'authentic.' Given the benign constructions they have imposed on the data, pluralists have been particularly ill prepared to understand these developments, which they tend to attribute to religion's having been 'hijacked' by political forces external to itself, little realizing that religion and politics cannot so neatly be disintricated.

Hick's Pluralistic Hypothesis

It is within the trajectory marked out in the preceding pages that I would like to locate John Hick's magnum opus, *An interpretation of religion: human responses to the transcendent*, which developed out of the Gifford lectures he gave in 1986–1987. In the well-known book, Hick advances what he calls 'the pluralistic hypothesis,' i.e., the claim that 'the great post-axial faiths constitute different ways of experiencing, conceiving and living in relation to an ultimate divine Reality which transcends all our varied visions of it.' Hick calls this divine reality 'the Real.' Drawing a quasi-Kantian distinc-

[56] Heim, 110.
[57] Masuzawa, 20.

tion between things as they are in themselves and those same things as we experience them, he argues that although the Real *an sich* is ineffable, it can variously be represented as a personal deity or an impersonal Absolute, depending on the culture. For instance, God (though conceived as ultimate within Christianity) and Brahman (though conceived as ultimate within certain forms of Hinduism) are simply 'different manifestations of the *truly* Ultimate within different streams of human thought-and-experience.'[58] For Hick, 'the divine noumenon is a necessary postulate of the pluralistic religious life of humanity.'[59]

How does Hick arrive at this conclusion? What problem is it meant to solve? Hick begins his argument with the observation that we live in a 'religiously ambiguous' world, one which 'evokes and sustains non-religious as well as religious responses.'[60] In face of this ambiguity, the religious believer (no less than the religious skeptic) is entitled to trust her or his own experience:

> [I]n the absence of any positive reason to distrust one's experience—and the mere fact that in this religiously ambiguous universe a different, naturalistic, epistemic practice is also possible does not constitute such a reason—it is rational, sane, reasonable for those whose religious experience strongly leads them to do so to believe wholeheartedly in the reality of God.[61]

But here, Hick suggests that a difficulty arises: the very same argument he has been using to show that Christians can be justified on the basis of their experiences in believing in God can be deployed to show that other people with different experiences can be justified in believing in things that seem to be incompatible with God. 'Thus,' he writes, 'those who report the advaitic experience of oneness with Brahman, or who experience in the ego-less state of Nirvana the reality of the eternal Buddha-nature, or who are conscious of the "emptiness" of all things as their fullness of "wondrous being," are entitled to base their belief-systems on those forms of experience.'[62] It will not do, Hick maintains, to 'claim that our own form of experience, together with that of the tradition of which we are a part, is veridical whilst the others are not,' since this would amount to a violation of 'the intellectual Golden Rule of granting to others a premise on which we rely ourselves.'[63] It is at this point that Hick introduces the pluralistic hypothesis as the only satisfying way of accounting ('religiously') for the varieties of religious experience; his conclusion is that the incompatibilities among the various religions are merely apparent and that each tradition is, in fact, oriented around the same noumenal religious object variously encountered in the phenomenal world.

I rehearse these arguments not because I find them compelling—I do not—but because they nicely illustrate the pluralistic apologetic I have been describing. The first thing to notice about them is that they frame the path to religious commitment as in effect involving *two* choices: the first between religion and naturalism and the second among the 'great religions.' These options can be conceived on the model of a decision tree; it is only when one has opted against naturalism that one is confronted with the

[58] Hick, 249, italics added.
[59] Hick, 249.
[60] Hick, 74.
[61] Hick, 221.
[62] Hick, 228.
[63] Hick, 235.

plurality of religions. On this construal, the choice between religion and irreligion is logically prior to the choice *among* the religions and requires 'a cognitive decision in face of an intrinsically ambiguous universe.'[64] The term Hick uses to describe the 'choice' to experience the world religiously is 'faith.' He writes, '[T]his fundamental option occurs at the deeper level of the cognitive choice whereby we come to experience in either a religious or a non-religious way.'[65]

The second observation to make is that Hick's argument against religious exclusivism, i.e., the view that 'our own form of religious experience, together with that of the tradition of which we are a part, is veridical whilst the others are not,'[66] begs a rather important question. This becomes apparent if we ask why the kind of grounds on which the person of faith is entitled to reject naturalism do not also permit, e.g., the Christian to reject Buddhism, or vice versa. Recall that when defending the rationality of faith, Hick had argued that 'the mere fact that in this religiously ambiguous universe a different, naturalistic, epistemic practice is also possible' does not constitute a reason to distrust one's religious experience, and that in the absence of compelling reasons for doubt, it is 'rational, sane, reasonable for those whose religious experience strongly leads them to do so to believe wholeheartedly in the reality of God.'[67] But if naturalistic responses to the world do not give the religious believer reason to doubt, why should the existence of alternative religious responses constitute an objection to religious exclusivism?[68] If, for example, a Christian has had experiences that lead her to believe in God, but not experiences that lead her to believe in Nirvana, and if it seems to her (on the basis of her total experience) that belief in God is incompatible with belief in Nirvana, then why is she not entitled to believe that experiences of Nirvana must not be veridical? It would seem that the exclusivist would be entitled to reject the veridicality of alternative religious experiences and the truth of alternative religious beliefs on precisely the same kind of grounds that Hick says entitle us to reject beliefs about 'witchcraft, astrology, or alchemy, or the existence of extra-galactic intelligences controlling our minds through rays, or the demonic causation of disease,' namely, that they fail 'to cohere with what we believe on the basis of our experience as a whole.'[69] Hick's verdict with respect to the latter beliefs would appear to apply in the religious case as well—that 'although we may recognize that people of other cultures have reasonably held these beliefs, nevertheless we shall not feel obliged to hold them ourselves; indeed we may on the contrary feel obliged to reject them.'[70] Hick's argument in favor of religious pluralism seems to depend on the premise that belief in God does not actually contradict belief in Nirvana. But since that is precisely the conclusion he is attempting to prove, to assume it from the outset is to beg the entire question against the exclusivist.

My aim here is not to defend exclusivism, but to point up an inconsistency in Hick's argument for the pluralistic hypothesis—one required by the two-story structure I described a moment ago. This two-stage presentation—sometimes construed in terms

[64] Hick, 159.
[65] Hick, 159.
[66] Hick, 235.
[67] Hick, 221.
[68] The question here is not the sociological/psychological question explored by Berger and others of whether plurality weakens religious confidence and vitality.
[69] Hick, 219.
[70] Hick, 219.

of a distinction between faith and belief[71]—is central to the pluralist polemic against secularism. Its rhetorical effect is to simplify what is otherwise rather messy by insisting that there is only *one* kind of difference that matters—that between religion and its antithesis—rather than many. Unlike in the case of the various religions, each of which represents a valid and salvific interpretation of the Real, the issue between faith and naturalism is 'ultimately a factual one in which the rival worldviews are subject to eventual experiential confirmation or disconfirmation.'[72] But once one acknowledges the inconsistency of treating the 'choice' (to use Hick's term) against, say, Buddhism differently than the choice against naturalism, the second story of Hick's edifice collapses into the first, and one is faced with a 'choice' not simply between religion and naturalism, or among the 'great religions,' but among *all of these* (and a variety of other) possibilities, with the notable exception of religion conceived generally. In other words, without the two-stage structure, religion cannot be treated as a single (if internally differentiated) option contrastable with naturalism.

Over the past two decades, Hick's pluralistic hypothesis has been criticized not only by 'exclusivists' like Alvin Plantinga and Peter van Inwagen, who argue that it assumes more than Hick's arguments warrant, but also by theologians like John Cobb and Mark Heim, who contend that it does not go far enough; insofar, as it presupposes a single religious object and a single conception of salvation, the pluralistic hypothesis seems curiously un-pluralistic. On Hick's account, the world religions are finally to be celebrated not *because* of their differences, but *in spite* of them. My claim is that this is not simply an oversight; rather, it is motivated by the underlying logic of the pluralistic defense against irreligion. Here, then, we can begin to see how Hick's ostensible pluralism is in fact encouraged by distinctively Christian concerns about secularization in the West. It is at bottom an apologetic project, as Hick readily admits,[73] and the challenges to which it responds are distinctively Western in origin. That this is so can be clarified further by taking another look at Hick's discussion of the world's 'religious ambiguity.'[74]

Careful examination reveals that Hick's use of the concept of ambiguity is itself rather ambiguous. On the one hand, he suggests that the universe 'is religiously ambiguous in that it is capable of being interpreted intellectually and experientially in both religious and naturalistic ways.'[75] This way of putting the point implies that some people experience it one way, and others experience it the other way; some believe in

[71] See, e.g., Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Faith and belief* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979).
[72] Hick, 13.
[73] See Hick 9. The social location from and for which Hick writes can further be clarified by interrogating the way he uses the first-person plural pronoun at crucial junctures, as for example, when he writes, in a quotation cited a moment ago, that belief in witchcraft and the demonic causation of disease 'fails to cohere with what *we* believe on the basis of our experience as a whole': who is this 'we,' anyway? Plainly, it does not include many of the world's current inhabitants, including a good many Americans, who seem to detect no such incoherence.
[74] In earlier writings, Hick had appealed to religious ambiguity in the context of theodicy. In these works, the world's religious ambiguity is a function of the 'epistemic distance' required for human freedom; an ambiguous world is precisely the kind that God would want to create in order to ensure that humans have the possibility of freely responding. Hick's later work appears to take over this earlier conception of the world as religiously ambiguous, but to situate it in the context of a rather different epistemology. Here 'religious ambiguity is a special case of the general fact that our environment is capable of being construed—in sense perception as well as ethically and religiously—in a range of ways' Hick, 12.
[75] Hick, 129.

God, for instance, and some do not. This much is uncontroversial. But Hick proceeds in the same paragraph to remark that 'ideally, the religious person should, even whilst experiencing and living in the world religiously, be able to acknowledge its theoretically equivocal character; and the same holds vice versa for the non-religious person.'[76] On this interpretation, it is not simply that some see the world one way and others the other way, but that everyone *should* be able to see it *both* ways. It seems plain, however, that many people *do not* see it both ways. In fact, Hick admits this. For instance, he notes that for premodern people, 'the reality of the transcendent was accepted as manifest fact, unquestioned except by an occasional boldly skeptical philosopher.'[77] He also acknowledges that in the contemporary world, 'the skeptics have mostly been secularized Christians and Jews or post-Christian and post-Jewish Marxists,' and that '[d]istinctively post-Hindu, post-Buddhist and post-Muslim forms of skepticism have yet to arise.'[78] Indeed, it is worth noting in this connection that the world is not particularly religiously ambiguous to the skeptics themselves; Sam Harris and Richard Dawkins are no less confident in their views than were the premoderns.

So *for whom* is the universe religiously ambiguous? Hick's answer seems to be that it is experienced in this way primarily by *modern Christians and Jews in the West*. Indeed, the chapters dealing with the world's ostensibly 'seamless cloak of religious ambiguity' focus entirely on arguments for and against the existence of *God*, as these have arisen in Western philosophy.[79] In other words, a distinctively modern problem in the West—the question of God's reality—is here being universalized into a general thesis about the universe itself; that it is not universally *experienced* as ambiguous only goes to show that not everyone has (yet) grasped its true nature.

I do not deny that the world can be experienced as ambiguous; I experience it that way myself. But ambiguity is in the eye of the beholder. To put the point in Taylor's terms, the world is experienced as religiously ambiguous by those within the immanent frame, for whom the frame remains at least slightly open. Those outside the immanent frame, such as premodern Westerners or perhaps some in non-Westernized cultures, or for whom the frame is closed to all forms of transcendence, such as Dawkins, do not seem to experience the world in this way. To insist, as Hick does, that the latter have failed to grasp a general truth—as though the world's religious ambiguity were analogous to the earth's sphericity—is simply to project ahistorically one's own epistemic situation onto others.

Challenges for Philosophy of Religion: a Mini-Manifesto

I wish that I could draw from the preceding remarks a tidy conclusion but must confess to having more questions than answers. What I shall attempt to offer instead are three interrelated ethical challenges for those of us who, while suspicious of the ideology of world religions, remain interested in something resembling pluralistic philosophy of religion.

[76] Hick, 129.
[77] Hick, 73.
[78] Hick, 74.
[79] Hick, 114.

The first is to engage other points of view without colonizing them. The cultural and religious landscape in which most of us live and work is changing in ways that philosophers of religion can ill afford to ignore. Not only is it becoming more diverse, but attitudes toward diversity are changing. For some, this means that the repertoire of available 'options' is expanding, but I think it would be a mistake to generalize this observation. As I have tried to indicate, the relation of pluralist Christianity to other perspectives is often asymmetrical. These differences are especially salient in the case of immigrant and minority communities struggling to maintain collective identities in the face of powerful mechanisms for assimilation. From this perspective, the suggestion that 'all religions' are equally valid—with its implication that differences of belief and practice are of no real importance—is likely to be perceived as a threat to the distinctiveness and integrity of their own communities. Without careful attention to the dynamics by which religious identities are constructed and differences assimilated, otherwise well-meaning pluralists risk becoming gatekeepers for American denominationalism, custodians of civil religion.[80] Engagement with integrity will require greater sensitivity to imbalances of power and access in what passes for 'interreligious dialogue,' as well as to the various 'vertical' registers of power that the 'flat,' lateral delineation of world religions obscures.[81]

Nor can we assume that such dialogue will take place within a shared context of secularity. Taylor has argued that 'the immanent frame is common to all of us in the modern West,' but on this point I think he is mistaken.[82] For reasons I have already alluded to—including colonialism, economic globalization, and global migration—the 'modern West' is not the end product of an autonomous tradition, but the site of confluence of many streams of cultural transmission. The diversity characteristic of any major American or European city is a result not simply of internal fragmentation within Western culture but also of the West's contact with non-Western cultures through both inward migration and outward expansion. If the West is taken to denote, among other things, a quasi-geographical space, however porous and elastic its borders, then the diversity that characterizes it today surely includes a good many outside the immanent frame. Immanence may be typical of one kind of modernity, but there are multiple modernities.

One reason other forms of life tend to escape our notice is precisely because the discourse of world religions conceals them. *Pluralism* is defined as much by what it excludes as by what it includes. Indeed, the 'major traditions' affirmed by contemporary pluralism are nearly identical to those investigated by nineteenth-century orientalism, from which, after all, pluralism inherited its typology. The language of 'major' or great traditions should alert us to the presence of hierarchies of power and status even within the pluralist paradigm. As J. Z. Smith has noted, 'A World Religion is a religion like ours; but it is, above all, a tradition which has achieved sufficient power and numbers to enter our history, either to form it, interact with it, or thwart it. All other religions are invisible.'[83] In a similar vein, Charles Long observes, 'More often than

[80] Though disestablished and contested on virtually every side, liberal Protestantism retains considerable privilege in American public life, which means that, in seeking to affirm the validity of other religions, traditionally Protestant schools of theology run a similar risk of taking on the role of accrediting agencies for non-Christian traditions.

[81] I have in mind here class, race, gender, sexuality, etc.

[82] Taylor, 543.

[83] Jonathan Z. Smith, *Map is not territory: studies in the history of religions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993 [1978]), 295.

not, the differences that bring a culture or a people to the attention of the investigator are not simply formed from the point of view of the intellectual problematic; they are more often than not the nuances and latencies of that power which is part of the structure of the cultural contact itself manifesting itself as intellectual curiosity.'[84]

Moreover, even among those perspectives the existence of which pluralism acknowledges, there are two that lie beyond the limits of its otherwise capacious embrace. On one side is secularism—for it is this over against which religion is defined and defended—and on the other are those 'exclusivist' forms of Christianity that pluralism claims to supersede. That even pluralism requires exclusions serves to remind us that there is no view of culture from above, no perspective on diversity that does not contribute to it.

A second challenge for philosophers of religion is, thus, to respect conceptual differences without pretending to be neutral. Some scholars of religion attempt to 'bracket' questions of value in the interests of morally and theologically disinterested description, but whatever its merits in the social sciences—and these are debated by social scientists themselves—the *epoché* clearly will not do in normative disciplines like philosophy, theology, and ethics. To bracket evaluative questions would be to set aside the very subjects and methods that define these disciplines.

If we are honest, we will admit that diversity can be celebrated only within limits. This is not merely a moral or political point but a logical one; real cultural and religious diversity involves incompatibility, and respect for conceptual differences precludes assigning equal value to everything. Like a jigsaw puzzle that has had some extra pieces mixed in, there are more possibilities on the table than will fit neatly into a single frame or form a coherent picture. As Raimundo Panikkar has repeatedly stressed, '[a] pluralistic system would be a contradiction in terms.'[85] There is more in heaven and on earth than can be contained in any philosophy; if it could all be reconciled and systematized, there would be no differences left to celebrate.

Here we encounter a third challenge, namely, to allow our self-understandings to be tested by what they exclude. All evaluation is perspectival, but perspectives can be enlarged. The recognition that diversity can be celebrated only within limits need not issue in exclusivism or narrow-minded self-satisfaction. Indeed, it is only when the other is allowed to be itself that it can challenge the (sometimes politicized) limits of our present thinking. Instead of constructing a 'respectable' other, we must allow the other to test our criteria of respectability; domesticated differences neither present any serious threat nor provide any opportunity for growth.

The encounter with otherness is often painful, and 'celebration' is not always the right word to describe what transpires; incompatibility, after all, is the stuff of tragedy. Sorrow and repentance are often in order. Yet, I remain convinced that serious engagement, undertaken soberly and alert to the subtle relationship of knowledge to power, is well worth the effort. In any case, the choice is not *whether* to engage, but *how*; in today's globalized world, engagement can be done well or badly, but it cannot be avoided.

[84] Long, 5.

[85] Raimundo Panikkar, 'The Jordan, the Tiber, and the Ganges: three kairological moments of Christic self-consciousness,' in *The myth of Christian uniqueness: toward a pluralistic theology of religions*, ed. John Hick and Paul F. Knitter (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1987), 109.